DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 111 006 CS 202 222

AUTHOR Lukenbill, W. Bernard
TITLE Who Writes Children's Books? An Inquiry Into Selected Social Characteristics of American Authors for Children and Adolescents.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 17p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; *Authors; *Behavior Patterns; Childrens Books; *Childrens Literature; Social Attitudes; *Social Characteristics; Social Values

ABSTRACT

In order to learn more about contemporary authors of children's books and their sociological views, a study was conducted of a randomly selected sample of 220 Canadian and American authors living in either Canada or the United States. Biographical data was collected from the reference source "Something About the Authors" concerning sex, social class, education, place of birth and residence, marriage, children, political and religious affiliations, reference groups, and nonliterary or artistic occupations of authors. Findings show that authors of children's books tend to be white, middle-class married women with some college education, residing in the United States' northeast or west. They also tend to have children and to be occupationally identified with the higher, but not highest, prestige occupations. It is possible that the majority of these authors have held common social perceptions, but evidence shows that the recent demands of society have introduced authors from backgrounds in conflict with the established order who are now writing a different type of children's literature. (JM)

**********
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
**********

ED111006

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

# Who Writes Children's Books? An Inquiry into Selected Social Characteristics of American Authors for Children and Adolescents

By

W. Bernard Lukenbill

Assistant Professor

Graduate School of Library Science

University of Texas at Austin

Austin, Texas

August 29, 1975

CS 202 222

Who Writes Children's Books? An Inquiry into Selected Sicial Characteristics of American Authors for Children and Adolescents

In recent years, a great deal of criticism has been directed at books written for children and adolescents [illegible]h social agents as educators and librarians. Much of this criticism is directed especially at the way in which minorities and women have been presented in this medium. Such criticism generally carries the themes that minority cultures are misunderstood by those who write about them and that the depiction of female sex roles in children's books is for the most part a hindrance to the cause of eliminating sexism from books and materials made available to American children through such socialization agencies as schools and libraries [4, pp. 107-115; 9, pp. 30-33].

With this criticism in mind, it seems appropriate to ask the question: "Who writes children's books?" Such a question naturally leads to consideration of the sociological background of children's authorship. Although scholars interested in children's literature have been somewhat neglectful in collecting primary socio-biographical data about children's authors conducive to sociological inquiry, nonetheless, data is available which gives us some guidance in understanding the basic sociology and role perceptions of children's authors.

For example, a vast amount of historical and cultural material already exists on children's authorship in America. From cultural histories written on the development of children's literature in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we are able to understand sociological influences at work on authors of these periods. From these historical-cultural studies, we can infer how social roles were perceived by children's authors of these periods and how historical settings influenced those role perceptions rather consistently.

In her well-known study, Monica Kiefer discussed how American children's authors of the early and mid-1700's viewed their roles largely as teachers whose duty it was to convey religious guidance and the theology of salvation to children [6, pp. 28-68]. Such role perceptions were well reinforced by the value system of the dominant environmental structures in which these authors existed and wrote. Even by the 1830's, the role perceptions of authors had not really changed in that writers still considered their role to be that of teachers who carried lessons of moral and good conduct rather than of salvation to children through books and stories [6, pp. 69-105].

It should not be forgotten that the instructive roles and values which were adopted by these authors of the early 1800's and which, in turn, produced a common stylistic pattern of writing for the period were institutionalized within the confines and value systems of dominant middle and upper middle-class society. Although alternative positions undoubtedly existed in segments of society, especially among the intelligensia, rarely did an author who perceived variant values succeed without the broad institutional support of the middle class. A case in point is that of Lydia Marcia Child, founder and editor of the first children's magazine in America, the Juvenile Miscellany [10, p. 252] Child, an outspoken feminist and abolitionist, was forced to cease publication because of the unpopularity of her abolitionist view [10, p. 252].

A further example of the institutionization of children's literature is found in the period 1825 to 1860. This was a time in which American nationalism became an important attribute of middle-class society and this concept was likewise reflected in children's literature of the period [3, p. 3]. The role perceptions of the majority of writers during this period still continued to be largely pedagogically oriented and to reflect the

nationalism of the era. It is only in the latter part of the nineteenth century that we see broader evidence of a shift in the role orientation of some authors who wrote for children. During this period, certain significant American authors came to look upon writing as a literary experience for children rather than as a device for information and moral instruction. Louisa May Alcott, Howard Pyle, Thomas Bailey Adlrich and Joseph Altsheler are examples of such authors who not only displayed a different role pattern from most of their contemporaries, but who were also influenced by the structural setting of their location in time and place and who brought innovative interpretations of events and values into the children's literature of the period[10, pp. 359-360]. In time, they were probably influential in redirecting the role perception of children's authors who followed them.

Unfortunately, little such analyzation and systemization of the characteristics of contemporary authors for children has been attempted, although isolated sociologically oriented studies of individual authors do exist, such as Maria Ram's sociological study of well-known children's author Lois Lenski and Frank Campenni's investigation of the former American Communist and children's author Howard Fast which concentrated on the influence of Fast's political reference groups, Marxist ideology and Marxist-Communist literary theory[1, 11].

In attempting to fill such a void, and to establish a profile of contemporary American children's authors, the present study, following the guidelines of British sociologist Diana Laurenson, looks at empirical biographical data of individual authors and their literary activities [8, p. 311].

## Method of Inquiry

In order to gather these biographical data, this study relied on a reservoir of author data contained in the reference source Something About

the Authors, volumes 1-5, edited by Anne Commire [13, V, 1-5]. This reference source, although intended for use by children, was selected because it contains information on a wide renge of contemporary authors read by and recommended for children today. Authors included ranged from prestigious Newberry Award winners to authors of "poor quality" series books, such as the Lucky Starr and Nancy Drew books [13, V.1, p. 5]. Also important to this study was the fact that much of the data provided in this source was acquired through direct query of individual authors.

The criteria for inclusion of authors for study were these: that authors be American or Canadian or that they reside either in Canada or in the United States and that they be primarily authors of fictional or prose material and not specialty writers (e.g., authors of non-fiction books) nor primarily illustrators. A population of 538 authors was identified as meeting these criteria, and from this population a 41 percent sample of 220 authors was randomly selected. This sample size has been shown to be adequate for research purposes with populations of this number [7, pp. 607-610].

In order to collect information relative to the social characteristics of children's authors, the following data suggested by Laurenson were collected: sex; social class (occupation of father or of husband); education (type); place of birth and residence; marriage; children; political and religious affiliations; reference groups (memberships, sponsorships); and non-literary or artistic occupations of authors [8, p. 311-323].

## Findings

Women were found to be well in the majority as authors of children's fiction and prose literature. Of the 220 number sample, 68 percent were women, while 32 percent were men. Historically, women have always played a significant part in the writing of children's literature. This may be a result of the close association which children's literature has had with

child-rearing and teaching. Even the eighteenth and nineteenth century societies allowed women to engage in the writing of books and stories for children without adverse social sanctions. In fact, many women of intelligence and wit often found artistic expression through their writing for children. Names which come readily to mind in this regard are Maria Edgeworth and Lydia Child, among others.

In the matter of race, whites far outnumbered blacks and members of other races as authors. In the sample of 220, of the 184 whose race could be determined, 97 percent were white, while only 3 percent were black.

Based on this sample, it appears that black authors have made relatively few inroads into children's literature despite the pluralistic nature of American society and the demand for minority representation in the writing of this literature.

Concerning other descriptive factors, a large 81.4 percent of the authors in the sample were married or had been married, while 18.4 percent had never been married. Previous marriages were noted by 14 authors and 11 authors indicated they had been divorced. Of the 220 subjects, 68.7 percent had children while 31.4 percent listed no children.

Educational characteristics of the authors showed that the highest level of education attained by the majority of these authors was some level of post-secondary education. Although not all authors who entered colleges graduated with degrees, a sizable 51 percent reported having attended college at one time or another during their lives. In fact, 26.8 percent indicated some level of graduate education as their highest educational attainment. Should we also include those 10.9 percent who pursued technical post-secondary education -- assuming of course, that this technical

education was post-secondary in nature -- we find that a total of 88.6 percent of the authors were educated beyond the secondary level. Only one author in the total sample admitted to having acquired only a grammar school education.

As a guide to the family social standing of the authors within the confines of the American social structure, this study used as its index the occupational-prestige levels of either the fathers of husbands of the authors. Using as a general guide the Hodge, Siegel and Rossi table outlining occupational prestige groups by rank number, the identifiable occupation of either fathers or husbands was compared with prestige ranks of occupations in this table[5, pp. 286-302]. Following traditional sociological practice, in the case of male authors and unmarried female authors, the fathers' occupations were used as the prestige indicators; while in the case of married women, the husbands' occupations were the prestige factors. When exact matches of actual occupations of fathers or husbands and occupations appearing on the table could not be made, the comparison was then made with a similar occupation found on the table.

An arbitrary decision was made to divide this table by Hodge, Siegel and Rossi into four categories for classification purposes. The first prestige group included ranks between 1-20 and encompassed such occupations as physicians and dentists, scientists, college professors, lawyers, architects and ministers. Nineteen percent of the sample fell into this category. The second prestige group included ranks between 21-41. Here were included such occupations as civil engineers, bankers, public school instructors and teachers, artists, authors, electricians, factory owners and building contractors. This category held the largest number of the entire sample, 30

percent. Prestige group three included ranks of from 42-62 and included such occupations as machinists, newspaper writers, policemen, farmers, store managers, mail carriers and plumbers. Some 9.5 percent of the authors fell into this category. Category four contained rank scores of from 62-90 and included truckers, store clerks, cooks, nightclub entertainers and garbarge collectors. This rank group held only 1.8 percent of the author sample. Rankings for some 39.5 percent of the sample could not be determined. Nevertheless, it is clear, from information available on 60 percent of the sample, that contemporary children's authors are drawn solidly from the broad middle class and higher prestige occupation levels. Even more specifically, it would appear that they are drawn primarily from what is typically considered the middle strata of the middle class.

In a paper developed in 1970 at the University of Chicago's Center for Social Organization Studies, it was hypothesized that regional identity tends to give direction and form to an author's writing. Looking at the authors in the sample from the point of view of regional identity, we have these data:

Table 1: Regional Identification of Authors

| Place of Birth: | N= 220 | Percent | Place of Residency | N=220 | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Northeast | 78 | 35.4 | Northeast | 106 | 48.2 |
| Midwest | 67 | 30.4 | West | 48 | 21.8 |
| South | 27 | 12.3 | South | 25 | 11.3 |
| West | 22 | 10.0 | Midwest | 22 | 10.0 |
| Foreign | 21 | 9.5 | Canada | 5 | 2.3 |
| Canada | 2 | .9 | Not given | 14 | 6.4 |
| Not given | 3 | 1.4 | | | |

It would seem that the northeast region of the United States is the primary place of both birth and residency of contemporary children's authors. However, regarding birth, collectively other areas of the United States

account for 63.2 percent of all cases. Likewise, these data indicate that, in 45.1 percent of all cases, authors reside in areas other than the northeast. Nevertheless, the northeast has an attraction as a place of residency for almost half of the authors of which residency data was available. The west also seems attractive as a place for residence for children's authors. Interestingly, the midwest does not appear to be appealing or a popular residency for these authors.

Data indicating political affiliations also give insight into the broader social ideologies of children's authors. Nevertheless, authors seemed extremely reluctant to provide this information, as political data were not available from 66.4 percent of the sample of 220. Authors may have considered this much too private to reveal publicly. Of the 74 authors for which there were data, 42 percent classified themselves as Democrats; 23 percent, Republicans; and 34 percent, Independents. Only one percent declared themselves to be Liberal.

Information on the religion or non-religion of authors may also help to clarify the social orientation of authors. But authors in this sample were again reluctant to give data regarding their religious affiliations. Of the 220 subjects, 58.6 percent did not provide any information relating to this question. For those authors for which information was available, the following profile emerged:

Table 2: Religious Affiliations of Authors

| Religion | N=220 | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Protestant Christian | | |
| Anglican (Episcopal) | 17 | 7.7 |
| Protestant (only designation given) | 12 | 5.5 |
| Presbyterian | 10 | 4.5 |
| Unitarian/Universalist | 9 | 4.1 |
| Other | 21 | 9.5 |
| Catholic Christian | 10 | 4.5 |
| Jewish | 8 | 3.6 |
| No religion | 4 | 1.8 |
| Not given | 129 | 58.6 |

Because of the large number of authors for which data were not available, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the religious identity of children's authors. Basing the analysis on only those authors who publicly identified themselves with a religion, it is obvious that the orientations are primarily Christian and Protestant and that the authors adherred to the main line churches. The Jewish religion accounted for only 4.1 percent of the religious affiliations cited. In four cases, authors stated that they had no religion.

In the matter of non-literary or artistic occupational identity, some rather interesting data were found. Non-literary or artistic occupations were narrowly interpreted here to mean occupations not involved with the actual writing or illustration of books intended for the trade market. Of the types of occupations specifically categorized in the study, 27.1 percent were in the general media field. Of this group, 17.5 percent of the citations in this category were various occupations involving some aspect of publishing and media work, including work with publishing magazines, editing newspapers, radio and films. Some of the authors stated that they had worked as copy writers, while others mentioned having worked in various areas of film and radio production. Some 9.6 percent of the occupations cited in the general media category were positions as editors or publishers in the book, magazine or newspaper publishing industries. From these percentages, it would appear that media and publishing predominated as non-literary-artistic occupations pursued by these authors.

Teaching at the elementary, secondary and higher-education levels was also popular as a type of non-literary-artistic occupation. Teaching accounted for 20 percent of the types of occupations noted. Other interesting occupational types included executive positions, 5 percent; public service positions, 3.1; and sales, 3.1.

Table 3: Types of Non-Literary-Artistic Occupations Cited by Authors

| Occupations Cited | Number of Citations (N = 417) | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Combined Media Work | 113 | 27.1 |
| General Media (Copy Writers film, radio) | (73) | (17.5) |
| Publishing and Editorial Work | (40) | (9.6) |
| Teaching | 83 | 20.0 |
| Military Service | 33 | 7.9 |
| Public Service | 26 | 6.2 |
| Executive Work | 21 | 5.0 |
| Library Work | 13 | 3.1 |
| Sales | 13 | 3.1 |
| Scientific Research | 3 | 3.1 |
| Other | 49 | 11.7 |
| No other occupation(s) | 56 | 13.4 |
| No Data Available | 7 | 1.7 |

Interestingly enough, 56 authors, or 13.4 percent, cited no other occupations outside of their literary or artistic careers. From these data, it would appear that contemporary children's authors display occupational histories closely associated with the media and the teaching professions. This relationship seems logical in terms of the mode in which children's literature has come to be institutionalized within North America. To explain, it would seem that as a device for pedagogy and cultural enrichment, children's literature has traditionally attracted educators as a means of self-expression and instructional communication. On the other hand, those who have learned the techniques of the journalistic media and writing have also found it an ample means of professional expression.

According to Laurenson's theory of the sociology of authorship, reference groups, memberships and also coteries may be indicators of social orientation. The types of reference groups and memberships indicated by the authors in the sample were these:

Table 4: Types of Memberships and Reference Groups Cited by Authors

| Memberships | Number of Citations N=289 | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Writers/Artists Associations | 80 | 27.6 |
| General Literary/Artistic Associations | 32 | 11.0 |
| Civic/Political Associations | 31 | 10.7 |
| Educational Associations | 25 | 8.6 |
| Other (Professional, Honorary Religious, Recreational Greek Letter) | 121 | 42.0 |

Looking at the specifically cited memberships, it is clear that those authors tended to identify with writers associations and to a lesser degree with general literary, education and civic associations. But in 72 cases, authors gave no information about memberships whatsoever. Because there is such a diverse pattern of memberships in associations, it is again difficult to generalize about its meaning. For the most part, most of these organizations were rather neutral as far as any political or social view orientation was concerned. For example, only in four cases did authors indicate that they were members of the socially and politically sensitive Civil Liberties Union.

## Summary

From these data, it would appear that children's authors tend to be white, married women with some college education who reside in the northeast or west. They generally have children; their family backgrounds are primarily middle class; and occupationally, they can be identified with the higher, but not highest prestige occupations. Judging from information available on only 34 percent of the sample, it might be inferred that

politically, children's authors tend to be Democrats, but Republican and Independent affiliations closely follow. From the data, there was relatively little indication of radical political identity among the authors.

In the matter of religion and based on data from only 41 percent of the sample, it was found that these authors were generally Protestant Christian and that they identified with main line churches. The Episcopal, Presbyterian and Unitarian-Universalist churches drew allegiance from 42 percent of the authors who gave a Christian religious identification. In only four cases did authors state outright that they had no religion. But it should not be forgotten that over 58 percent of the sample did not reveal their religion or non-religion.

In the matter of non-literary or artistic occupations pursued by the authors at some time during their life, it was found that work in some aspects of the media (publishing, editing, film, radio, copy work) predominated. Teaching at both the college and lower levels was also popular. Regarding reference groups and memberships, the authors in this sample were members of writers and artists associations for the most part, but a surprising 32.7 percent indicated no memberships or associations whatsoever.

Although these data do present an interesting profile, an additional step seems necessary and that is to consider this profile in relation to a specific social role conception held by authors. The University of Chicago's Center for Social Organization Studies paper cited earlier maintains that the concepts which authors hold about their roles are not far removed from the social and historical structural contexts in which authors are located and which provide them with an intellectual and artistic

orientation toward reality, and it is through role identification, that stylistic orientations between authors who perceive similar social role conceptions similarly emerge and converge [2, p. 11].

Based on the points of literary theory discussed in the Chicago paper and interpreted in light of the present data, the possibility of common social perceptions being held by authors of contemporary children's literature is likely. It would be logical to assume that those concepts echo the white, middle-class value system. There was no evidence in the biographical data examined that these authors were at conflict with prevailing middle-class social values. It might be argued too that this lack of conflict is a further indication of a common role perception which would facilitate and encourage a common white, middle-class style and thematic approach in literature for children. But to more concretely identify the role perceptions of contemporary authors for children, it will be necessary to seek data through more direct contact with authors than was possible here. The full understanding of social orientation of children's writers necessitates the acquiring of fundamental information from a broad and diversified sample of authors either through interviews or questionnaires designed to specifically reveal role perceptions.

Although these data indicate that children's authors are primarily white, middle-class and Protestant, in seeking to formulate a sociological literary orientation for children's literature, we must guard against the assumption that all authors respond as a group. There is ample external data that the pluralistic demands of our society are producing authors from all types of backgrounds who are at conflict with the established order and who are, in turn, helping to bring about a different type of children's literature [4, pp. 107-115; 9, pp. 30-33; 12, pp. 801-805].

As with any body of literature, authors of children's literature must interact and relate to societal and human values; and it is those changing and often conflictive values which influence authors to produce viable and exciting literature. Yet, without the infusion of conflictive cultures and values which are the causes of moral struggles, children's literature has traditionally displayed a tendency to become establishment-oriented and institutionalized. The pluralistic society evident for the latter decades of this century may be influential in bringing about the collapse of rigid, class-value orientation and institutionalization in novels and stories for children.

References


1. Campenni, Frank. "Citizen Howard East. A Critical Biography." Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Wisconsin, 1971.

2. Chicago University. Center for Social Organization Studies. The Sociology of Black American Literature: The Changing Social Role of Black Writers. Working Paper #171. Bethesda, Maryland: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 072 121, 1970.

3. Crandall, John C. "Patriotism and Humanitarian Reform in Children's Literature, 1825-1860." American Quarterly 21 (Spring, 1969): pp. 3-22.

4. Feminists on Children's Media. "A Feminist Looks at Children s Books." In Issues in Children's Book Selection: A School Library Journal/ Library Journal Anthology. New York: R.R. Bowker Co., 1973.

5. Hodge, Robert W. et al. "Occupational Prestige in the United States, 1925-63." American Journal of Sociology 70 (November, 1964): pp. 286-302.

6. Kiefer, Monica. American Children Through Their Books, 1700-1835. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948.

7. Krejcie, Robert V. and Morgan, Daryle W. "Determining Sample Size for Research Activities." Educational and Psychological Measurement 30 (Autumn, 1970): pp. 607-610.

8. Laurenson, D.F. "A Sociological Study of Authorship." British Journal of Sociology 20 (September, 1969): pp. 311-325.

9. Mathis, Sharon Bell. "Who Speaks for a Culture?" Reading, Children's Books, and Our Pluralistic Society; edited by Harold Tanyzer et al., International Reading Association, 1972.

10. Meigs, Cornelia et al. A Critical Hisotry of Children's Literature: A Survey of Children's Books in English from Earliest Times to the Present, Prepared in Four Parts Under the Editorship of Cornelia Meigs. Rev. ed. New York: Macmillan, 1969.

11. Ram, Marie L. "The Sociological Aspects of the Lois Lenski Literature-- An Exploratory Study." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Buffalo, 1958.

12. Sebesta, Sam Leaton and Monson, Dianne Lynn. "Children's Literature." Choice 7 (September, 1970): pp. 801-805.

13. Something About the Authors: Facts and Pictures About Contemporary Authors and Illustrators of Books for Young People, edited by Anne Commire. Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research, 1971 - , v. 1 - .